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[Suggested Title: Making Hay out of Religion]

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Sermon

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One of the great paradoxes of human nature is the meeting of opposites, the fact that two conditions which are contrary to each other in the extreme can produce the same effects. How frequently are we amused to find the Vatican and the Kremlin towing, with characteristic dogmatism, the same line; occasionally we are astonished at the coincidence of views of the Wall Street Journal and the Daily Worker. Both extreme Right and extreme Left are alike in condemning the liberal centre, and in demanding blind obedience of their followers. Both were equally hostile, for instance, to the Marshal Plan.

In the same vein, we find that affluence and plenty often produce the same results as do adversity and poverty. It is no secret that indigence breeds immorality and corruption. In the Middle Ages, the Black Plague and universal poverty combined to cause the greatest crime wave in the recorded history of Europe. Murder, violence and theft were the immediate results of pestilence and destitution. Starvation and privation are bound to unleash the tidal waves of immorality and degenearcy whether in Nablus of Arab Palestine or in Harlem of enlightened New York. Sociologists usually blame low standards of morality on low standards of living.

But the astounding fact is that there are people who would behave immorally and irreligiously and unethically when they earn \$200 a week, whereas they did not do so when they barely eked out a living at \$25 a week. Somehow prosperity will sometimes produce worse effects than will poverty. The recent basketball scandals have shown that boys from wealthy homes are not necessarily immune from the temptation of the fixer. Today, when America is enjoying comparatively high prosperity, the record for narcotics, sports scandals and government bribery is as black as ever. It is a well-established phenomenon that the ~~the~~ nouveau riche, the man who has suddenly become wealthy, leaves his House of Worship and forgets his religion. Even political immorality is practiced by the extremely wealthy. There are some millionaires who are known sympathizers of American Communism, an "ism" which usually preys on the poor and dejected only.

One of the great paradoxes of human nature is the meeting of opposites, the fact that two conditions, contrary to each other in the extreme, can produce the same results. How frequently ~~are~~ we amused or astonished ~~to find~~ at the coincidence of views of the Vatican and Kremlin, or the Wall Street Journal and the Daily Worker. Both extreme Right and extreme Left were equally hostile, for instance, to the Marshal Plan.

In the same vein, we find that affluence and plenty often ^{give} ~~results~~ the same results as do adversity and poverty. That poverty and privation should cause immorality and a breakdown of religious standards is obvious. Look at Europe after the Black Plague; look at Arab ^Nablus and New York's Harlem. But, curiously, wealth is as trying a test of human spiritual endurance as is the lack of it. The fellow who suddenly becomes rich also tends to weaken in his ethical, moral and religious life. America today is the most prosperous of nations. Yet its moral record is the worst in its history.

This principle or paradox was already formulated in the Torah and explained by our Sages. In today's Sidra we read, אכלו ושבאו, "And you shall eat and be satisfied",

שמעו ופחדו, "take heed and beware lest your heart be deceived and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them". And the Rabbis of the Midrash infer from the sequence of the texts that there is a definite relationship between satiety, eating till you're full, and idolatry. אכלו ושבאו; שמעו ופחדו

אמר משה ליהודים. "Beware of rebelling against G-d - that is, worshipping idols - because it is only out of satisfaction and satiety that one takes to idolatry." Was not the Tower of Babel, the symbol of rebellion against G-d, built during a period of affluence? Did not the wickedness of Sodom flourish among a wealthy people?" And had the Rabbis of the Midrash lived today, they would add:

And was not Berlin, the city which admitted only wealthy "schutz-juden", the center of assimilation? And is not the Jew who moves from Rivington St. to Forest Hills the first to dispense with his Tallis and Tefillin, and ultimately with Shabbos and Kashruth and then all of Judaism? אכלו ושבאו; שמעו ופחדו. Only when people are satisfied

and content with themselves do they go a hunting for other gods, whether the money god or the entertainment god or the god whose first commandment is "thou shalt keep up with the Joneses"

Well, we can understand that אכלו ושבאו, satiety and contentment, should result in laxity of morals and religion. After a heavy gluttonous meal, one's metabolism rate drops, his pulse and respiration go down and energy is sparse. One feels lazy, and if he forgets his שמעו ופחדו, if he skips a מצוה or two or commits a sin or so, it is a result of negligence and indolence rather than אכלו ושבאו, rebellion against G-d, idolatry.

Why then do the Rabbis, why does the Torah insist that אכלו ושבאו leads to אכלו ושבאו, that eating to satisfaction is the precursor of the worst of all sins, idolatry?

My friends, idolatry, no matter what kind, ancient or modern, is easier than true religion. And because it is easier to practice, success is more readily attainable in idolatry than in monotheism. First of all, it requires less mental exertion. True religion is more abstract, ~~then~~ more difficult conceptually than belief in a tangible idol. The invisible is harder on the intellect than the visible. Then, idolatry is less taxing emotionally than

Judaism. It is easier to offer your overt devotions to or embrace a slab of concrete or a totem pole or a Rembrandt or a moneybag or a rabbit's foot than it is to fall in love with an unknown G-d whom your senses cannot even detect. And, lastly, idolatry places less restrictions upon your behavior than does our religion. The creed of the Moloch or Baal never demanded strict Sabbath observance. The religion of the money-bag certainly places no restrictions on corrupt business practices. And the faith in the sacred cow of science requires ethical conduct of no one. All sources indicate that idolatry has frequently sanctioned murder, immorality and downright degeneracy.

Why do normal people fall prey to the curse of idolatry? Why do they succumb to this opiate of easy living? Let us read the verse preceding the one we have previously quoted:

וְאֶתְכֶם אֶתְּנֶה לְעֹשֶׂה אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים וְעָבַדְתֶּם אֱלֹהֵי אֲחֵרִים וְעָבַדְתֶּם אֱלֹהֵי אֲחֵרִים וְעָבַדְתֶּם אֱלֹהֵי אֲחֵרִים וְעָבַדְתֶּם אֱלֹהֵי אֲחֵרִים

"And I will give grass in you fields for your animals and you shall eat and be satisfied," and then, "beware of worshipping other gods". Certainly! If a man is satisfied with eating the grass reserved for his cattle, if he is satisfied to thrive on straw and hay, then certainly his goals are so low that he will be satisfied with the easily attainable idolatry. If his noblest goals are not as high as the stars in heaven, but as low as hay in the field, and if he is satisfied with this grass, then his loftiest aims and ambitions in his entire religious life will be not the dedication to One G-d in heaven but the worship of a dozen cheap clay and wooden statues. וְאֶתְכֶם אֶתְּנֶה לְעֹשֶׂה אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים וְעָבַדְתֶּם אֱלֹהֵי אֲחֵרִים, the danger of idolatry rears its ugly head when people's aims are level with the ground, when they strive for straw and are content with their success in obtaining it.

The great American ideal is "success". But "success" can apply as well to a well-executed murder as to the amassing of a fortune. I have two friends who intended to accelerate their reading this summer. One decided to read ten important novels published during the past year. The other friend was less ambitious and selected three best-sellers for his summer reading list. By today, I hear, the ~~first~~ second fellow has well completed his list of three books. He is by all American standards a success. The first fellow finished only eight of the ten books he had set out to read. Again by American standards, he is a dismal failure. Yet who has accomplished more? Is success really a measure of achievement? Is it really necessary for a meaningful life?

In this same vein, idolatry is easier to succeed in than Judaism. It all depends on what your original goal is. אַרְזֵל, אֲבִיחַ גַּמְדֵּי קֶזֶל רֵי אַיִן. People who are satisfied with straw are rife for idol worship.

Look about you in your places of business and in the streets, and you will meet the typical American Jew of 1951. How high are his goals? Doesn't he seem to think that an insignificant check to a charity is the summum bonum of Jewish life? Isn't he satisfied with a Sunday School education for his children? ~~Look~~ His highest religious ideal is to visit the synagogue on the High Holy Days. And sometimes he is even satisfied with a ~~synagogue~~ ^{temple} which differs from a cathedral only in minor architectural details. His standard for Kashrus is two sets of dishes in the home and one set all over the rest of the world. In short, our typical American Jew is often satisfied with straw. A bellyful of hay is sufficient to pacify his spiritual hunger, and a thimbleful of ersatz-religion satisfies his cultural requirements.

אַרְזֵל אֲבִיחַ גַּמְדֵּי קֶזֶל רֵי אַיִן. He is unfortunately satisfied with the grass for his cattle, and that means that he is prepared to bow and kneel to the next idol. What the American Jew needs is not a face-lifting but a lifting of his level of vision. He must learn to aim higher.

One of the reasons that the Talmud gives for the destruction of the Temple is ¹⁹²⁸ אֵלֶּה הֵיוּ הַדְּמוּתוֹת, that the people acted only as was legally expected of them, and no more. They followed the letter of the Law, but failed to rise to the spirit of the Law. This view of the Talmud was given a modern slant in plain English when Sen. Fulbright, commenting on the sad state of American political morals, said that it was "setting a low level" for our national development if "our only goal for official conduct is that it be legal instead of illegal". Indeed, he was expressing the popular fear that our country, the Sanctuary of Democracy, is endangered because its sights are as high as the ¹⁹²⁸ אֵלֶּה הֵיוּ הַדְּמוּתוֹת, the strict Constitutional law, and not אֵלֶּה הֵיוּ הַדְּמוּתוֹת, the spirit of the law, the unwritten moral code. A diet of hay & straw is bad for the spiritual health of our nation. We must raise our sights.

Peretz, the famous Yiddish and Hebrew writer, has immortalized the type of Jew whose goals were no higher than *זאנדל פֿאַר אַן עזל*, the animal's straw, in his story "Bontsch Schweig". When Bontsche died, he was tried by the Divine Tribunal, and the Heavenly Court decided that he merited any reward he would chose. Bontsche could not believe it. "Taki? Really?", he asked in wonder. He was reassured. When Bontsche announced his decision, the court and angels looked down, a little ashamed, and the prosecutor laughed. For Bontsche had answered, "Well, if it is so, I would like to have every day, for breakfast, a hot roll and fresh butter".

In the same way, a leader who prods his people on to higher goals and loftier ambition is a leader who loves his people. And, conversely, the leader who lulls his people into complacency and self-satisfaction is a traitor. Some of the most laudatory and flattering of epithets ~~ever~~ were bestowed upon Israel by Balaam, the gentile prophet. Oh, how he praised us! Just compare what he told the Jews to the sermons that Isaiah preached at them. Balaam told them that G-d saw no sin or evil in them; Isaiah said that they were repulsive to G-d and rebellious sons. Balaam told them that glory would be theirs without a struggle; Isaiah warned of impending doom if they would not mend their ways. But who would you say loved Israel more? Certainly, the strict and critical Isaiah! For he set higher and finer goals for his people, goals more difficult to achieve, if success was at all humanly possible. He demanded of them exertion and initiative, while Balaam told them that they could rest on their laurels, that they were successful and nothing else of great import was worth striving for. Balaam was not a friend - he was a bitter enemy. The leader who loves his people will give them not a pat on the back, but a shot in the arm. He will teach them that if *אָרבעט אַרבעט*, if they can digest and be satisfied with *זאנדל פֿאַר אַן עזל*, with hay and straw, then they are bound to wind up prostrating themselves before *פֿאַר אַן עזל*, pagan idols.

Our good friend, ex-Ambassador James G. McDonald, warns us in his recent book that "the spiritual future of Israel is not without danger". We can keep our aims low and become a bannana republic on the shores of the blue Mediteranean, or we can press forward towards

the mark, the prize of our high calling. Success is assured us if ~~our~~ we will be content with hay; but the rewards will be greater if our ideals will be loftier.

Today we welcome the month of Ellul. During this month, reserved for penitence and introspection, we will reevaluate and possibly reset our present standards and ideals. We can make them as low as the grass upon the fields for the cattle, or as high as the stars in the infinite heavens above. Which shall it be?

Benediction:

אֲנִי מִלְּבָבִי יְהִי לְךָ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ תְּפִלָּה

"Unto You I lift up my eyes, O You who are enthroned in the heavens"

O G-d who dwells on high, teach us to lift our eyes unto you, so that our vision may be lifted from the material goals of animals to the spiritual goals of men who are but little lower than the angels. For well do we know, ~~as Prof. Heschel writes in his latest book,~~ that if Man will not be more than human, then he is less than human. Amen. Shabbat Shalom.